

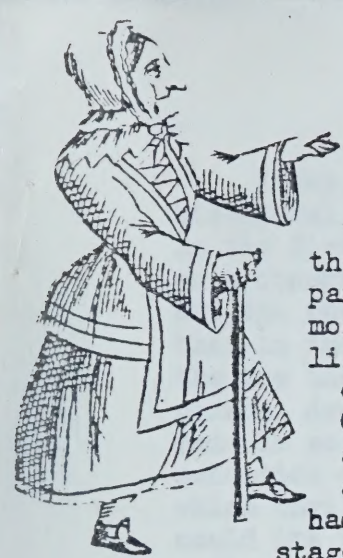
"A PENNY PLAIN, TWOPENCE COLOURED"
OR, THE DRAMA IN PASTEBOARD



The English toy theatre, one of the treasures of the Victorian nursery, originated in the souvenir theatrical portraits of the late eighteenth century. These full-length portraits in dramatic poses were drawn directly from contemporary London stage hits by such distinguished artists as Hogarth, Rowlandson and Gillray to satisfy a growing public demand for souvenirs of favourite actors and actresses.

The success of this new popular art created two major problems: how to produce these portraits cheaply and quickly while the play was still fresh in the public mind; and how to display all the favourites from a single play at the same time. George Speaight, the eminent English toy theatre historian, has suggested that around 1810 someone conceived the idea of publishing four small but different theatrical figures together on one sheet. The characters would have been from the same play, and the name of each performer would have appeared under each figure. Such a sheet might have been headed, "Characters from Aladdin, or the Wonderful Lamp performed at Covent Garden". No example of such a four-character sheet is known to exist, although it is known that as early as 1811, William West was already publishing from his Circulating Library on Exeter Street off the Strand sheets of 6 or 7 characters each, several of which do survive. Each sheet sold for a penny plain to be coloured at home, or for twopence already hand-coloured at the shop.

Many of these early character souvenir sheets were drawn by well-known artists - William and Henry Heath, George Cruikshank and George Childs. At first, they were intended for the entertainment of young people, or "juveniles", hence the other name of the toy theatre, the "juvenile drama". These adolescents probably began embellishing the sheets in some way - colouring, cutting-out and mounting them. Eventually someone else, perhaps one of the many publishers or "theatrical stationers", thought to include a few scenes and wings also copied from actual stage productions to make the theatrical souvenir more complete. When the playbook of accompanying words and small stages, exact replicas of Drury Lane or Covent Garden, became available, the theatre in miniature had arrived completely.

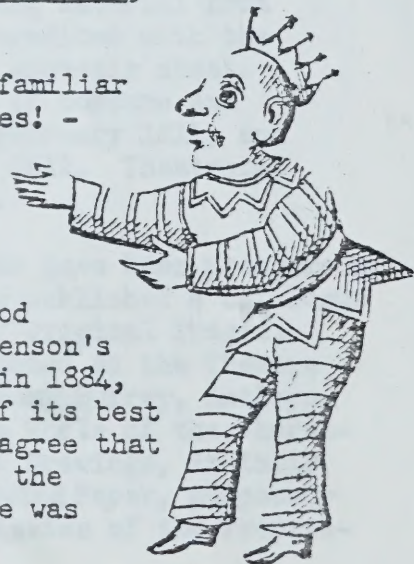


The origin of every toy theatre play can be found on the living stage. In fact, until the mid-nineteenth century, these "juvenile drama" sheets represented fairly accurately the contemporary London stage - the set designs, the costumes and the acting style of the best Regency and early Victorian melodramas, pantomimes and equestrian spectacles. Later, as the sheets became more popular and widely distributed by the growing number of publishers, especially the Skelt family, the characters became standardized and stereotyped, remote from any actual performance. One noticeable result of this commercialism was a decline in the artistic quality of the sheets; the drawings were less accurate and the colouring less sophisticated. The juvenile drama, which had grown out of adult drama and had been adapted to entertain stage-struck youth, developed finally into a rough-and-ready children's toy.

There were other nursery games that prepared the way and influenced the direction taken later by those early theatrical prints: "turn-up", or flap-picture books (ca. 1770) which outline the antics and adventures of Harlequin; cut-out dolls and later cut-out character books with moveable heads and bodies; and finally the popular watercolour painting books (ca. 1780). Even though they lacked movement, all paper toys became increasingly favoured in the nursery. When the toy theatre was introduced there, the possibility of movement came to paper and cardboard.

Many famous people have cherished happy memories of growing up with a toy theatre - Sir Winston Churchill, Sir John Gielgud, J.B. Priestley, the Sitwells, Charlie Chaplin and Gordon Craig. In A Christmas Tree, Charles Dickens reminisced:

"... the toy theatre, - there it is, with its familiar proscenium, and ladies in feathers, in the boxes! - and all its attendant occupation with paste and glue, and gum, and water colours, in the getting up of the Miller and his Men, and Elizabeth, or the Exile of Siberia."



The best known and most vivid recollections of a childhood influenced by toy theatre are found in Robert Louis Stevenson's famous essay A penny plain, twopence coloured published in 1884, in which he immortalized the toy theatre in the person of its best known publisher, Skelt. All toy theatre owners seem to agree that it was the choosing, painting, colouring and mounting of the characters that was the most fun. The actual performance was usually a failure. As Stevenson wrote:

"You might, indeed, set up a scene or two to look at; but to cut the figures out was simply sacrilege; nor could any child twice court the tedium, the worry, and the long-drawn disenchantment of an actual performance. Two days after the purchase the honey had been sucked."

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Today, the toy theatre is a lively and colourful historical monument to the British stage as it existed in the first half of the nineteenth century. Gordon Craig once observed that England had the worst grownup theatre but the best toy theatre in the world. It might be argued that in this century as the adult theatre began to improve, the toy theatre, with all its stilted charm, began its general decline. Only when it was a reflection of what made it so attractive, when it was so accurate a representation of those romances, melodramas and spectacles which thrilled the early nineteenth century theatre patrons could its success be sustained. The twentieth century audience is no longer moved by such entertainment; it seems naive and funny now. Yet nostalgic memories of past magic and romance still linger in those brightly coloured cardboard figures that move silently across a miniature stage in their wooden slides.



ABOUT SOME OF THE PUBLISHERS

WILLIAM WEST, 1783-1854

West, a print seller and distributor of cheap reading material from his Circulating Library on Hoxton Street, is generally credited with the idea of publishing more than one theatrical figure on a souvenir sheet. The principle characters were also displayed in changes of costume and varying acting attitudes. His earliest sheet is dated February 1811, and his first complete play, Timour the Tartar, appeared in 1812. Theatrical prints were now no longer merely "pretty prints".



In the early years West appears to have been prosperous. He advertised with trade cards, and he published a catalogue which proclaimed, "West's Catalogue of Original Tragic, Fancy, and Comic Characters. As performed at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, Drury Lane, Lyceum, Surrey, Astleys, Sadlers Wells, etc. etc. etc. ... The Whole of the Characters are Finely Engraved from Original Drawings, in their exact Costume, and Printed on Fine Drawing Paper, purposely for Colouring. And Published by Permission of the Proprietors of the Different Theatres".

However, William West died a poor man. There is a legend that rather than allow any other publisher to have his plates, he destroyed them all.

SKELT FAMILY

The Skelt family is responsible for bringing the toy theatre into almost every middle class British home. Martin Skelt, a shoemaker, bought the stock of many of the publishing firms which became bankrupt during the depression of the 1830's. He began shortly to reissue some of these sheets, substituting his name for that of Orlando Hodgson or R. Lloyd, two of the engravers who sold him their stock. After coming into some money, he was able to publish a very extensive run of sheets, and sell them at a halfpenny each. Frequently, he published five or six editions of a popular play, such as "The Miller and his Men". The Skelt sheets were published as a family enterprise. At different times Martin, Matthew, Benjamin or Ebenezer was in charge of the business, and with the family monopolistic instincts and its impressive distribution schemes, its work soon became available in every corner of Great Britain. This widespread popularity is remarked upon by Stevenson in his essay when he commented, "the name of Skelt itself has always seemed part and parcel of the charm of his productions".

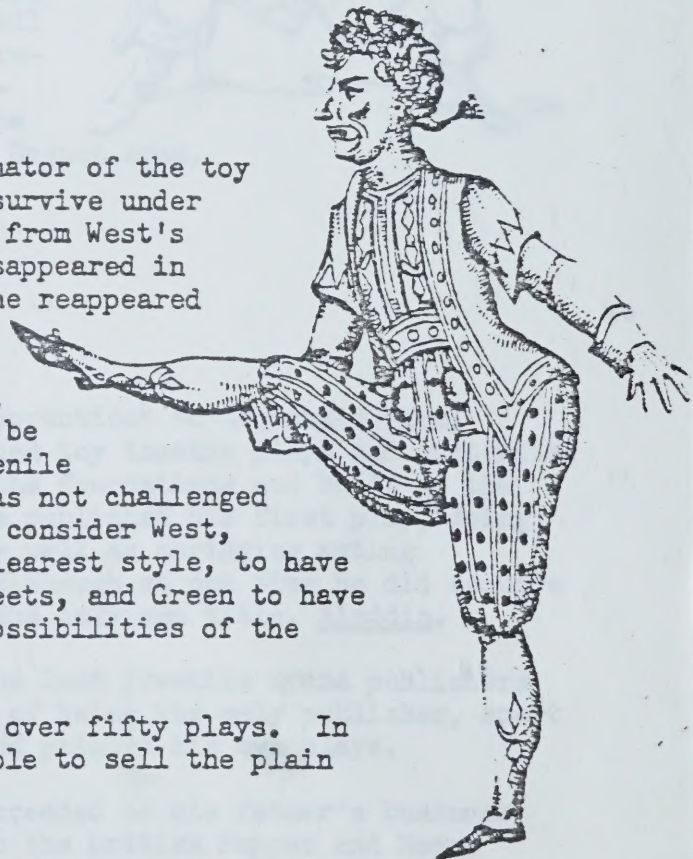
J.K. GREEN, 1790-1860

It is Green who claims to be the originator of the toy theatre. Although a sheet dated 1812 does survive under his name, Green at that time was publishing from West's address. For some unknown reason, Green disappeared in 1812 without trace for twenty years. When he reappeared in 1832, he was publishing once again under his own name, but from his own premises. It was now that he made his claim. In 1834, a book of words to a play proclaimed him to be "The Original Inventor and Publisher of Juvenile Theatrical Prints, Established 1808". He was not challenged by his contemporaries; but historians today consider West, who demonstrated the greatest mastery and clearest style, to have been the original publisher of the first sheets, and Green to have been the one, perhaps, who saw the future possibilities of the "Juvenile Theatrical Prints".

Between 1832 and 1857, Green published over fifty plays. In some cases, he reduced their size and was able to sell the plain sheets for only a halfpenny each.

JOHN REDINGTON, 1819-1875

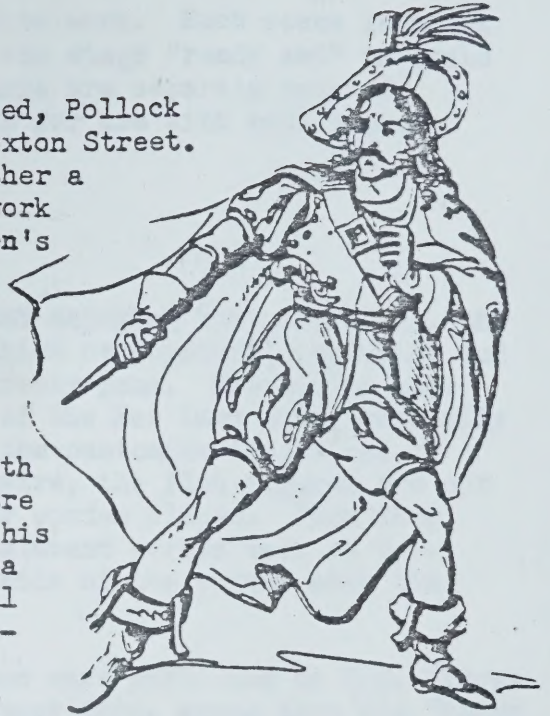
Redington, a printer, bookbinder, stationer and tobacconist, took over the business after Green's death in 1860. Redington had acted as his agent, as well as selling for Skelt, Park and Webb, but in 1850, he began issuing some of their sheets under his own name. He produced only a few originals, crudely drawn and undated. His daughter married Benjamin Pollock.



BENJAMIN POLLOCK, 1856-1937

In 1876, when he was 21 and newly married, Pollock took over his father-in-law's business on Hoxton Street. He was never an originator of plays, but rather a conservator of tradition. His only original work was to enlarge some scenes to accompany Green's Sleeping Beauty. Otherwise, he continued to reprint the plays he had inherited, as well-coloured and as clearly printed as the originals had been, for sixty years until his death.

In 1936, on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, the British Puppet and Model Theatre Guild mounted a commemorative exhibition in his honour. After his death, his daughter Louisa carried on for awhile, but was forced to sell out in 1944. Shortly after the stock was removed, the shop was hit by a bomb, and destroyed. It was finally demolished after the war during the rebuilding programme in the Hoxton area.



Louisa Pollock died in 1957.

W.G. WEBB, 1820-1890

In 1835, at the age of 15, Webb was apprenticed to Archibald Park, an etcher and lithographer who also published toy theatre plays and portraits. While serving his apprenticeship, he laid the foundations and built up the contacts for his own business. In 1847, he published his first play, doing his own drawing, engraving, and printing as well as abridging acting play-books and making them less stilted. Although at one time he did acquire some plates from Skelt, he managed to reissue only one title, Aladdin.

Along with Pollock, Webb was one of the last juvenile drama publishers of the old school. He has the distinction of being the only publisher, apart from Park, who personally drew, engraved and printed his own plays.

Webb's son, H.J. Webb (1852-1933), succeeded to his father's business and continued to publish his work. In 1926 the British Puppet and Model Theatre Guild held an exhibition honouring Webb.

Webb's characters and scenes for the most famous of toy theatre plays, "The Miller and his Men" are displayed in some of the cases. These particular sets were enlarged and elaborated by Dr. Hughes of Broadstairs, Kent, who was a member of the British Puppet and Model Theatre Guild, formed in 1925 to

create a new technique for modern model theatre work. Each scene is built and mounted on a wooden base for placing on the stage "ready set" to avoid the tedious delay between scene changes. There are separate sets of characters permanently fixed on wooden slides for use with each scene.

THE SHADOW PANTOMIME

At the same time that the toy theatre was enjoying its popularity, the "shadow show" or "shadow pantomime", a variation on puppetry, pantomime and the toy theatre, was becoming a favourite nursery game. The shadow show had its beginning in the shadow puppet arts of the Far East which gradually moved westward to Turkey and Greece, and in the pantomime traditions of Europe and Great Britain. As in the toy theatre, the flat figures are cut and mounted on cardboard and placed in tin or wooden slides. Then they are passed between a strong light and a translucent screen made of thin calico or gauze. The audience on the other side of the screen sees the shadows passing across it.

The examples displayed in this exhibition were published by H.G. Clarke (fl. 1875-1900) who issued a wide range of paper toys, among them his "Penny packets". At one time, he had been an agent for Webb, Pollock and Park, and had printed special books of words for their plays.



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